

The Future of Mobile Social Media in China:

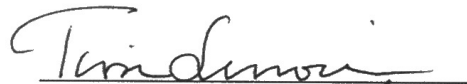
Empower or Control

by


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Abstract

China, the most populated country in the world, has blocked all the global social media services, and this attracted many scholars to study what are happening in China. I use Sina Weibo, the Chinese version of Twitter, to study the political power of social media in this country and conclude that mobile social media do empower the Chinese citizens and make the Chinese society more transparent.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Siri: “What can I do for you?” Penny: “Find me the best Chinese food restaurant near Campus Drive.” Siri: “I don’t like the word ‘best’; it’s superficial. I suggest you some popular restaurants...” Jim: “Siri sucks try Yelp, buddy.” ... Ten minutes later, we go to the Shanghai café. Half an hour passed, and food is served. “Hey, looks great!” “Wait a minute, let me take a picture.” “Me too!” Everybody takes out iPhone; shoot; upload it on Facebook. What? An airplane missed! Then all check Twitter. No one knows what is happening. OK, let us try New York Times; they should do the journalist job. Everyone is looking at the mobile. “Could we have human being interactions or just eat?” Welcome to the messy world of social media. Today, nearly everyone uses social media, talks social media, no matter what one’s favorite platform is, and we are overwhelmed by social media.

However, social media does not always works so smoothly. In the Occupy Wall Street Movement, the Tunisian Revolution, or the Egyptian one, social media services revealed their political power and raised a question that whether social media could empower the ordinary people. Without Twitter, Facebook, or YouTube, would these still happen? What is the situation in the countries without access to the global social media platforms? Syria, China, and Iran have banned the access to Facebook (“Censorship of Facebook”, 2014). North Korean, China, Iran and Turkey have blocked Twitter (“Censorship of Twitter”, 2014). China, Iran, Pakistan, and Turkmenistan have banned YouTube (“Censorship of YouTube”, 2014). China, the most populated country in the world has no access to almost all global social media services.

Thus, many scholars have studied this special situation in China. Until now most are focusing on user behaviors, Internet censorship, crisis management, corruption, and foreign affairs. Less attention is paid to how the Chinese citizens use Sina Weibo in political issues and the political power of Sina Weibo. For the Chinese domestic scholars, it is hard to study a political sensitive project because of the pressure from the Chinese government; for the international researchers, it is very difficult to study such topics if they cannot read Chinese language since the information on Sina Weibo is all in Chinese.

This gap between the political power of social media and the lack of relevant studies urges me to research the political influence of social media. Although little is known about how the Chinese social media works in political issues, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences claimed that the public could make the government know their opinions via Internet, and Internet become the channels by which the government and the regular people communicate. They even predicted that “the Internet will become a stronger influence on politics in China as the number of users continues to grow (Scotton, 2010, p. 41, New media, new China). These claims imply that social media constitutes a new public sphere of political communication where public opinions might form in China and even influence the Chinese government on political issues.

This paper seeks to test whether Sina Weibo constitutes a public sphere in China, to examine whether social media empower or control the Chinese people, and to explore the future of social media as a political power and the future they bring the country to.

Chapter 2: Background

Social Media Definition

The meaning of “social media” in the digital world is always debatable. Ahlqvist, Back, Halonen and Heinonen (2008, p. 3) proposed that social media contains three elements: “content, user communities and Web 2.0 technologies”. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p. 61) defined social media as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content”. Bruns and Bahnisch suggested that social media is “networked information services designed to support in-depth social interaction, community formation, collaborative opportunities and collaborative work” (as cited in Hunsinger & Senft, 2009, p. 1). In this article, Social Media is defined as network-based services accessible to the general public armed with mobile and web-based technologies to support users to create, share, exchange, modify, and discuss User-generated content (UGC), to interact with individuals, communities, and organizations, to form communities, and to act collectively.

History & Influence

Before the turn of the new millennium, new media services helped to form online groups, but could not connect users automatically (Dijck, 2013); just shortly after the millennium social media became as what we know it today. Blogger (1999), Wikipedia (2001), Facebook (2003), LinkedIn (2003), Flickr (2004), YouTube (2005), Twitter (2006), Instagram (2010), and etc. have brought us to the social media era, and change the way we used to live. Chatting with friends, showing pictures, or watching family members and neighbors’ videos used to be casual activities and shared within a small group; the social

media platforms take these private behaviors to the wider publics, and the original owner can no longer control the flow of the information. In contrast, news broadcasting, political campaigning, or business marketing used to reach audience via mass media; with social media, these public activities go to the individual level. The boundaries between public and private blurred, the nature of public and private communication changed, and the lives of online and offline mixed.

Not only in America, but also in the world, the changes brought by social media are huge. Many governments have an uneasy life with social media, and some people believe that social media will bring democracy to the oppressed countries. For instance, in Arab Spring nine out of ten Egyptians and Tunisians reported that they used Facebook to organize action (Huang, 2011). Lotan et al. (2011, p. 1401) even argued that “the revolutions were, indeed, tweeted”. Although it is debatable whether Twitter played an important role in the revolutions, it did raise global awareness of the events.

Then, what if we cannot know? We can hear the voices of the people who have equipped with global social media services, but how about the people have not? The digital divide mute the have not, and others might ignore their existences. Because of such restrictions, it is nearly impossible to truly understand the situation in these countries without living at there. Someone might ask: what is happening in these countries?

Social Media in China

It has been an open secret that the Chinese government has implemented censorship to mass media and Internet. Freedom House (2013) ranked China 179 in all 196 countries as one of the least press free country in the world. Reporters Without Borders (2014) also listed

China as one of the Internet enemies and claimed that the Chinese government applies censorship to maintain social stability. Google, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Wordpressan all have been blocked in China, and even the international services survived have been strictly censored. Although many global social media services are forbidden in China, their Chinese equivalents have been flourishing. As shows in Figure 1, every American social media platform has its Chinese version developed by the domestic companies with some minor differences. Thus, the Chinese residents do not miss the social media era, and the Chinese Internet users are some of the most intensive social media users in the world (Crampton, p. 29). The separated migrant workers' families, the lonely one-child generation, and the unreliable state-run mass media all have contribute to the popular of social media in China (Crampton, p. 29).



Figure 1. Social Media Equivalents in China. From “Social Media in China: The Same, but

Different Participating in China's unique and diverse social media environment is key to winning over online consumers,” by T. Crampton, 2011, *China Business Review*, 38(1), 28.

The Chinese social media services have been supplanting the traditional media, and even might challenge the Chinese government. A survey conducted by Fudan University reported that “more than 70 percent of people believe that new media can be more powerful tools for democratic supervision than traditional media” (“New Media”, n.d., para. 1).

Microblogging and Sina Weibo

Microblogging is an online broadcast medium that allows users to send short messages (usually within 140 characters) to update their daily activities, report the latest news, or express opinions. Within all the Chinese social media services, the most popular is Sina Weibo, a microblogging services like Twitter. On Sina Weibo, the Chinese Internet users can send messages, post photos, upload audios or videos, and comment on other's posts. Also, microbloggers can follow anyone on Weibo freely. Because of these conveniences, the user number of Sina Weibo has grown explosively since 2009 when it was launched after the Urumqi riots when all the previous domestic Weibo services were shut down and all international microblogging services were blocked. According to China Internet Network Information Center (the state-run internet management institution), the number of microbloggers reached 249 million in 2011 that accounted for nearly half of the number of Internet users in China. Also, it increased by 296 percent compared to 2010 and was the fastest growing Internet service in 2011 (*China Internet Development Statistics Report 29*).

In addition to the huge number of users of Weibo, microblogging in China has another unique feature: one in every two posts in Sina Weibo is updated through mobile

phone, whereas only 20 percent of Twitter texts are sent via cell phone (Crampton 30). This seems nothing special at first glance. However, the widely use of mobile on Sina Weibo reveals the essence of Weibo: “individual, instant, and interactive” (Hu 68). In contemporary society, mobile phones are considered to be one of the goods people must carry every day. Without it, one would feel uncomfortable or even anxious. Hence, the combination of mobile phone and microblogging in China turns Sina Weibo into a powerful tool. Any time, any place, any person can take a picture, write a commentary, and post it on Weibo via mobile phone. This is an efficient way to publish breaking news, express opinions, and communicate with other netizens. From this perspective, Sina Weibo is not only a social media platform, but also a mobile media service. Mobile social media is a new concept in the social media area. Wikipedia explains it as “the combination of mobile devices and social media”. Typically, the mobile devices related to social media are mobile phone and tablets, and in nowadays mobile devices usually include big screen, camera, Wi-Fi service, and Bluetooth. With the help of these technologies, mobile social media works more efficient than the traditional social media, and even have a function that the traditional social media does not have: location-sensitivity.

Before the launch of Weibo, the ordinary Chinese people could not spread information and communicate with each other so efficiently. Guomin Yu, a journalism professor in Renmin University of China states that during 2011 Weibo has become the most important channels of the Chinese netizens to access information online. Since the implementation of information control and censorship in mass media by the Chinese government, Chinese citizens sometimes are difficult to obtain “sensitive” information via

state-run TV programs or newspapers, no matter what kind of mainstream media, especially about the scandals of the Chinese government, man-made disasters, or protests against the Chinese government. Nonetheless, sometimes such controversial issues spread all over China since the eyewitnesses update them on Sina Weibo immediately, and millions of microbloggers might see it. Even though the Chinese government tried to delete these messages, they cannot control the information broadcasting since tens of thousands of the same messages were re-posted per hour on Sina Weibo and other famous websites such as Tianya and Mop. Also, the Chinese government always notices the events after they have already caused widespread concern. Therefore, many people consider Sina Weibo a more powerful tool compared to other online social media services such as blogs to impact or even change the Chinese society.

Chapter 3: Literature Review:

Concepts Related to the Political Power of Social Media

Public Sphere

The public sphere is a public space where individuals or groups could joint together to freely discuss social problems and public interests, to form public opinions, and even to influence political actions via the talk. The concept of public sphere is strongly connected to Jurgen Habermas's book: *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere – An inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. According to Habermas, the important conditions of the public sphere are:

- Formation of public opinion.
- All citizens have access.
- Conference in unrestricted fashion (freedom of assembly, freedom of association, freedom to expression and publications of opinions) about matters of general interest.
- Debate over the general rules governing relations. (as cited in Fuchs, 2013, p. 181)

Futher, when discussing the Internet and the public sphere, many scholars asserted that the aspects of political communication and political economy are related to the concept of the public sphere, and Habermas also confirmed that these aspects are “constitutive for the public sphere” (Fuchs, 2013, p. 183). Thus, Fuchs proposed that to test whether an Internet platform form a new public sphere, one should examine both the political communication and the political economy level:

- 1) Analysis of the political economic dimension of mediated communication:

1(a) Ownership:

Is there a democratic ownership of the media organization and resources?

1(b) Censorship:

Is there political and/ or economic censorship?

1(c) Exclusion:

Is there an overrepresentation of viewpoints of corporate elites or of uncritical and pro-capitalist viewpoints? To which degree are critical viewpoints present?

1(d) Political content production:

Who can produce content? How visible, relevant and influential is the produced content?

2) Analysis of political communication:

2(a) Universal access:

How relevant/ frequently used are political communication sites or political communication forums/ features/ contents within more general platforms? Who has access and who use the sites for political communication (income, education level, age, gender, ethnicity, origin, etc.)? How relevant is political communication in relation to other forms of communication (for example, as pure entertainment)?

2(b) Independence:

How independent are the sites and discussions from economic and state interests?

2(c) Quality of political discussion:

How valid (right, true, truthful, understandable), inclusive, attentive, sincere, reflexive and inclusive is political online discussion? (p. 184-185)

Habermas's idea of public sphere is an idea concept, and this concept was challenged by the working-class critique and the Feminist critique. Fuchs provided a more practical method to test the existence of public sphere in Internet. Thus my research is base on Fuchs's proposal.

Debates Over The Political Role of Social Media

When discussing the political influence of social media, on the one hand optimistic scholars claim that social media spread democratic ideas and help to free the people (e.g., Twitter revolution), and on the other hand pessimistic researchers believe that social media has little effect on real-life activism and are monitoring tools by states, and commerce instruments for companies, or even cause of violence (e.g., Internet surveillance and marketing).

Pessimistic Views of Social Media

Gladwell (2010) claimed that real-life activism is different from online activism; offline protesters usually take huge risks such as in the Mississippi Freedom Project of 1964. He also stated that a strong social tie is crucial in high-risk activism, e.g., friends, roommates, or family members, but on social media platforms people are connected by weak social ties in online activism. Although social media is good for people to get information, they seldom join high-risk activism if connected by weak ties. Gladwell also suggested that the lack of hierarchy and authority existed in offline activism makes social media works well in low-risk conditions such as Wikipedia, but not in complicated situations when people need to think strategically. Similar to Gladwell, Morozov used "slacktivism", "feel-good online activism

that has zero political or social impact”, to describe the typical activism of “lazy generation”: “why bother with sit-ins and the risk of arrest, police brutality, or torture if one can be as loud campaigning in the virtual space”. He argued that public attention generated by social media does not have effectiveness for real campaigns. (2009)

Even worse, some scholars believe that social media even harm civil society. Iosifidis argued that the political power of Internet and social media is overstated for several reasons:

the open participation of the Internet can turn chaotic; there is a problem of inclusiveness; censorship might be an issue; the Internet has become a major arena for corporate activity; the Internet’s content is highly partisan; and above all, extensive dialogue and critical discussion (the very essence of the public sphere) is often absent on the Net. (619)

He also proposed that open-platform Public Service Media (PSM) is the future of a true public sphere.

Optimistic Views

Shirky (2011) argued that:

The safest characterization of recent quantitative attempts to answer the question, Do digital tools enhance democracy? (such as those by Jacob Groshek and Philip Howard) is that these tools probably do not hurt in the short run and might help in the long run -- and that they have the most dramatic effects in states where a public sphere already constrains the actions of the government.

She also claimed that the effect of social media in political activism is coordination, and the commerce does not hurt the political effects. Moreover she proposed that general social

media platforms would be more useful than specific political media tools to pursue civil society and strengthen public spheres because “the conservative dilemma”:

The dilemma is created by new media that increase public access to speech or assembly; with the spread of such media, whether photocopiers or Web browsers, a state accustomed to having a monopoly on public speech finds itself called to account for anomalies between its view of events and the public's. The two responses to the conservative dilemma are censorship and propaganda. But neither of these is as effective a source of control as the enforced silence of the citizens. The state will censor critics or produce propaganda as it needs to, but both of those actions have higher costs than simply not having any critics to silence or reply to in the first place. But if a government were to shut down Internet access or ban cell phones, it would risk radicalizing otherwise pro-regime citizens or harming the economy.

Similar to Shirky's opinion, many Chinese scholars believe that social media has been contributing to the formation of a new Chinese civil society. Dong (2013) suggested that Weibo, as a public sphere, would lead the Chinese to a democratic society though it has some limitations.

Chapter 4: Research Design

The basic idea of this research is applying quantitative methods to a qualitative study: combining content analysis and case study, to test whether Sina Weibo constitutes a public sphere in China, and to explore how the regular Chinese people use it in political issue. Based on Fuchs's opinion that the aspects of political communication and political economy are crucial to examine whether an Internet platform constitutes a public sphere, I propose three steps to test social media:

1. Analysis of independence of Chinese social media:

i) Ownership:

Who owns Sina Weibo? Is the ownership democratic?

ii) Censorship:

Do censorship exist on Sina Weibo? What is the mechanism of the censorship?

What are the reasons of implementing censorship?

iii) Interest groups:

Is there any manipulation of Sina Weibo information from political or economical interests?

2. The availability of social media:

iv) Accessibility:

Who has access to Sina Weibo? Is there any technical obstacle?

v) User structure

Who uses Sina Weibo? Who can produce political content? Is there any overrepresented group or underrepresented group?

3. The political role of social media:

vi) Political content:

How visible and influential is political contents?

vii) Political discussion

How valid is political discussion? Is there critical opinion exist? What is the

influence of political discussion?

In the third step, the method of content analysis was applied to examine the quality of political discussion on Sina Weibo and explore whether public opinion was formed

(Appendix).

Chapter 5: Data Analysis and Discussions

Independence

Ownership

Sina Weibo is a Chinese social media platform launched by Sina Corporation on August 14, 2009. Although the number of Sina Weibo users has been increasing fast, Sina Weibo has not found its profit model. On 2012, Sina Weibo's revenue was 66 million dollars, but it spent more than 160 million dollars to operate. Thus it still lost 94 million dollars ("Sina Weibo, 2013). According to the same report, value-added services such as microgame accounted for 23 percent of revenue, and advertising accounted for 77 percent. Until now, Sina Weibo has not applied the same strategy of Twitter—"promoted tweets, promoted trends, promoted accounts" (Fuchs, 2013, p. 198)-which gives preferences to advertising clients. From this perspective, Sina Weibo does not treat economically powerful users and ordinary netizens differently. However, Sina Weibo has been actively seeking profit model and it is highly possible they will apply promoting strategies in the future.

Censorship

The Chinese censorship on Internet has been extensively studied in American academic area. In most recent researches, King, Pan, and Roberts (2013) did a large scale experimental study on Chinese social media and found that "the censorship program is aimed at curtailing collective action by silencing comments that represent, reinforce, or spur social mobilization, regardless of content" (p. 326). They also believed that the issues about the corruptions of high-level Chinese offices and online protests are tolerated to publish on social media, and the Chinese government is still using human source to apply censorship though

automated review exist (King, Pan & Roberts, 2014). All their statements match the Chinese common sense of how the Chinese government applies censorship on Sina Weibo.

Interest Groups

In China the Internet Water Army (网络水军) is a group of paid posters hired by public relations companies or the Chinese government to manipulate or change the public opinion. Yang (2011) separated Water Army into three groups: Free Navy, 50 Cent Party, and Internet marketer. Free Navy, which should not be considered a group, means netizens spontaneously forward or comment on a topic; 50 Cent Party is a group of Internet writers work for the Chinese government and try to manipulate the public opinion on certain issues and spread political propaganda; Internet marketer usually are paid posters from PR companies to popularize movies or products. Although Water Army is active on Internet, Li and Zheng (2012) argued that it “has only limited impact on online public opinion communication” (p. 30). Especially in political discussion, if someone posts pro-government opinion, she or he will be blamed as 50 Cent. Therefore, it is difficult for the Chinese government to manipulate public opinion.

Availability

Accessibility

As shows in Figure 2 and Figure 3, the Internet penetration rate has reached 45.8 percent till 2013 in China, but there is a huge gap between urban and rural China. Also, Table 1 shows that the Internet penetration rates in different provinces are disproportionate. In Beijing and Shanghai, the Meta cities, more than 70 percent of the population can use Internet. However, in the last three provinces the Internet penetration rate are all less than one

third. This phenomenon implies that many people from less accessible regions are underrepresented, and some specific groups might control the online opinions.

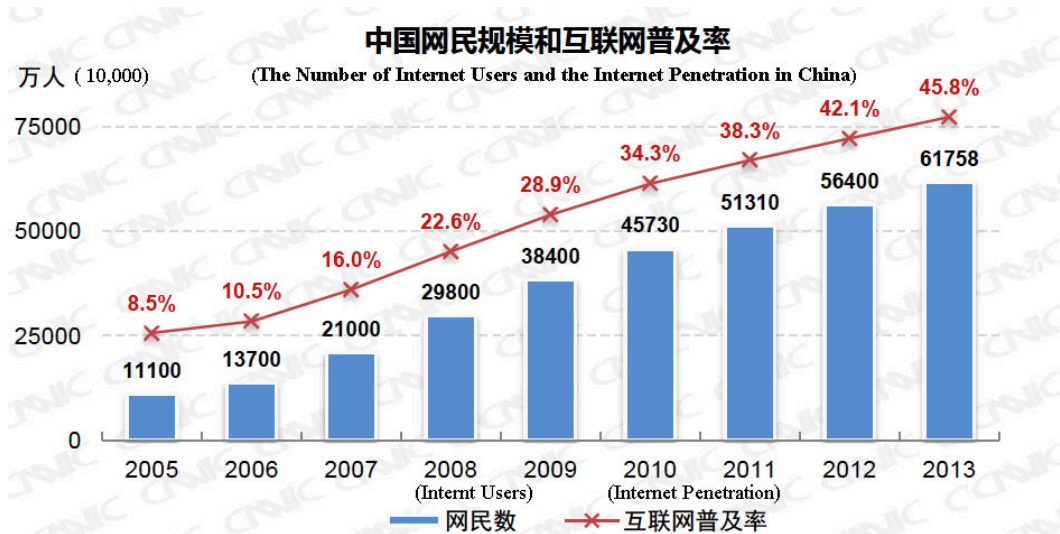


Figure 2. The number of Internet users and the Internet penetration in China. Adapted from “Statistical Report on Internet Development in China,” by China Internet Network Information Center, 2014.

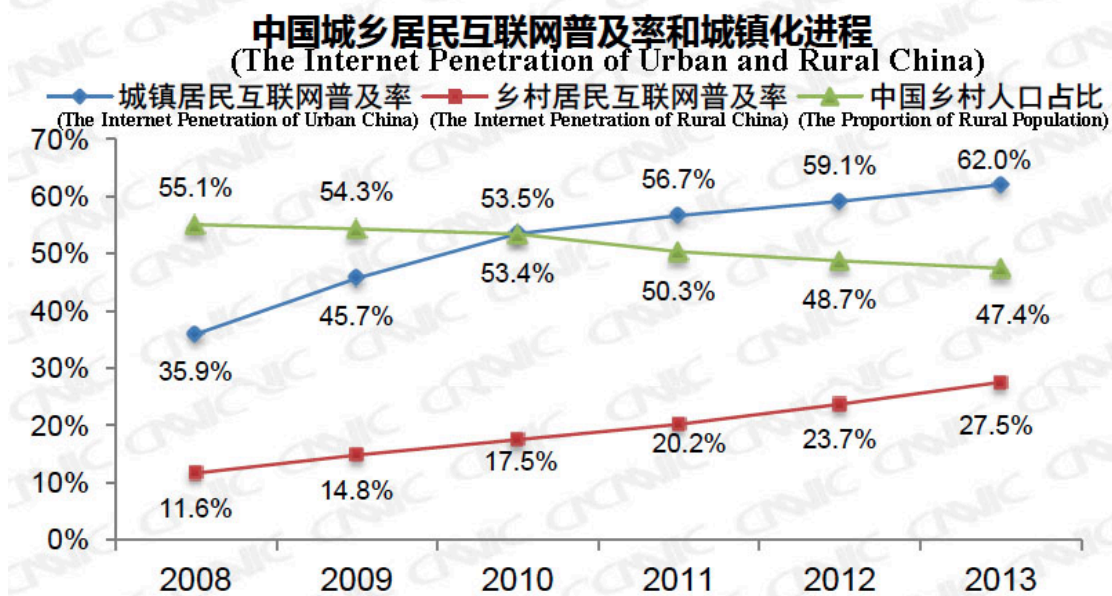


Figure 3. The Internet penetration of urban and rural China. Adapted from “Statistical Report on Internet Development in China,” by China Internet Network Information Center, 2014.

Table 1

The Internet penetrations and of all regions in China in 2013 & The proportion of Sina

Weibo users related to political topics from different provinces (PWP)

Province	Internet Users (10,000) in 2013	Internet Penetration and Rank in 2013	PWP and Rank in PWP in 2014	GDP per capital (US\$) and Rank in 2012	Urbanization Rate and Rank in 2011
Beijing	1556	75.2% (1)	8.74% (2)	13,797 (2)	79.36% (2)
Shanghai	1683	70.7% (2)	4.27% (5)	13,471 (3)	89.32% (1)
Guangdong	6992	66.0% (3)	11.52% (1)	8,570 (8)	52.17% (5)
Fujian	2402	64.1% (4)	2.71% (10)	8,359 (9)	34.01% (17)
Tianjin	866	61.3% (5)	1.67% (20)	14,750 (1)	61.50% (3)
Zhejiang	3330	60.8% (6)	4.43% (4)	10,022 (6)	31.41% (21)
Liaoning	2453	55.9% (7)	2.5% (12)	8,958 (7)	51.16% (6)
Jiangsu	4095	51.7% (8)	4.45% (3)	10,827 (4)	54.09% (4)
Xinjiang	1094	49.0% (9)	1.24% (28)	5,372 (18)	42.84% (9)
Shanxi (山西)	1755	48.6% (10)	1.65% (21)	5,327 (19)	33.22% (19)
Qinghai	274	47.8% (11)	0.78% (32)	5,231 (21)	33.43% (18)
Hebei	3389	46.5% (12)	2.64% (11)	5,796 (15)	31.91% (20)
Hainan	411	46.4% (13)	1.14% (29)	5,129 (22)	38.13% (14)
Shaanxi (陕西)	1689	45.0% (14)	1.96% (15)	6,108 (14)	35.58% (15)

Shandong	4329	44.7% (15)	3.79% (6)	8,201 (10)	41.13% (10)
Chongqing	1293	43.9% (16)	1.84% (17)	6,191 (12)	38.37% (13)
Inner Mongolia	1093	43.9% (17)	1.3% (26)	10,189 (5)	40.80% (11)
Ningxia	283	43.7% (18)	0.86% (31)	5,729 (16)	38.86% (12)
Hubei	2491	43.1% (19)	2.79% (9)	6,111 (13)	34.52% (16)
Jilin	1163	42.3% (20)	1.47% (24)	6,877 (11)	47.67% (8)
Heilongjiang	1514	39.5% (21)	1.81% (18)	5,657 (17)	48.48% (7)
Guangxi	1774	37.9% (22)	1.92% (16)	4,427 (27)	19.23% (28)
Xizang (Tibet)	115	37.4% (23)	0.73% (34)	3,633 (28)	17.35% (29)
Hunan	2410	36.3% (24)	2.4% (13)	5,304 (20)	22.33% (26)
Anhui	2150	35.9% (25)	2.26% (14)	4,561 (26)	22.90% (25)
Sichuan	2835	35.1% (26)	3.38% (7)	4,686 (24)	27.19% (22)
Henan	3283	34.9% (27)	3.19% (8)	5,025 (23)	22.08% (27)
Gansu	894	34.7% (28)	1.26% (27)	3,482 (30)	26.19% (24)
Guizhou	1146	32.9% (29)	1.32% (25)	3,100 (31)	16.21% (31)
Yunnan	1528	32.8% (30)	1.57% (22)	3,516 (29)	16.58% (30)
Jiangxi	1468	32.6% (31)	1.69% (19)	4,562 (25)	26.78% (23)
Hong Kong	N/A	N/A	1.52% (23)	N/A	N/A
Macao	N/A	N/A	0.74% (33)	N/A	N/A
Taiwan	N/A	N/A	1.06% (30)	N/A	N/A

Data Source. Statistical Report on Internet Development in China From,

<http://data.weibo.com/index/industry>,

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Chinese_administrative_divisions_by_GDP_per_capita,

and <http://www.docin.com/p-696557638.html>

User Structure

As Figure 4, 5, and 6 show, the typical Sina Weibo user was, less than 34 years old, had a bachelor degree, female or male. Similar to the Internet penetration rates in different provinces, the distribution of Sina Weibo users is also proportionated as shows in Figure 7. The young, well-educated urban residents dominate Sina Weibo, whereas old people, uneducated, and rural residents are underrepresented. In addition, Table 2 shows that messages from popular Sina Weibo account owners can reach far more audience than regular accounts, and the online opinion might be heavily influenced by these accounts.

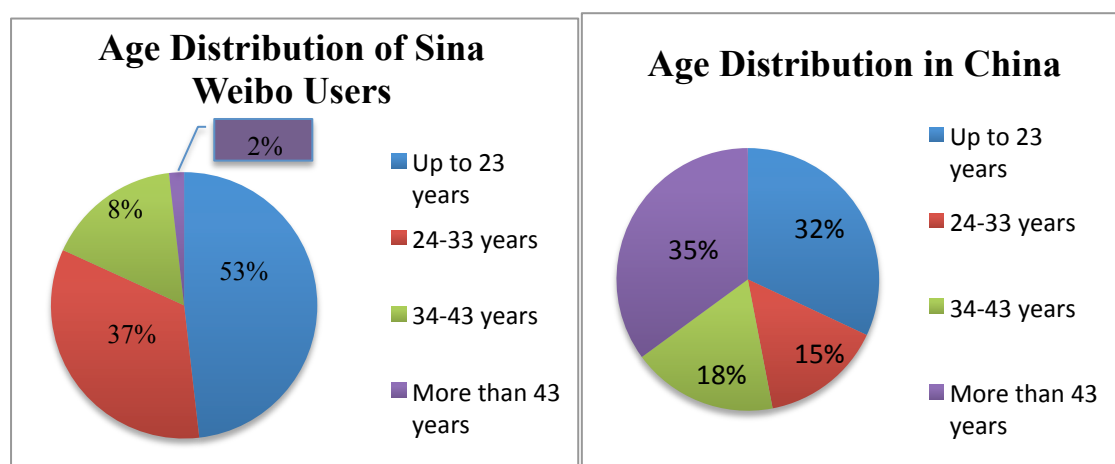


Figure 4. Age distribution on Sina Weibo & in China

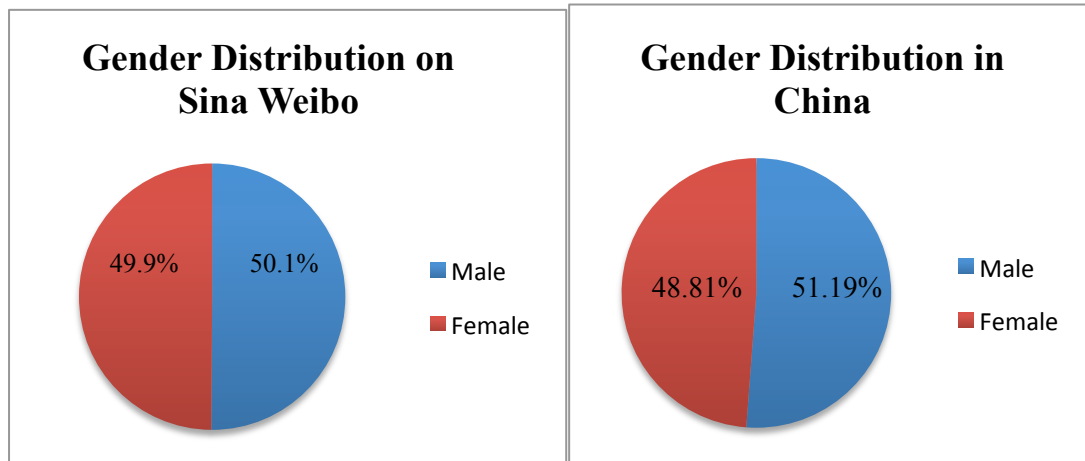


Figure 5. Gender distribution on Sina Weibo & China

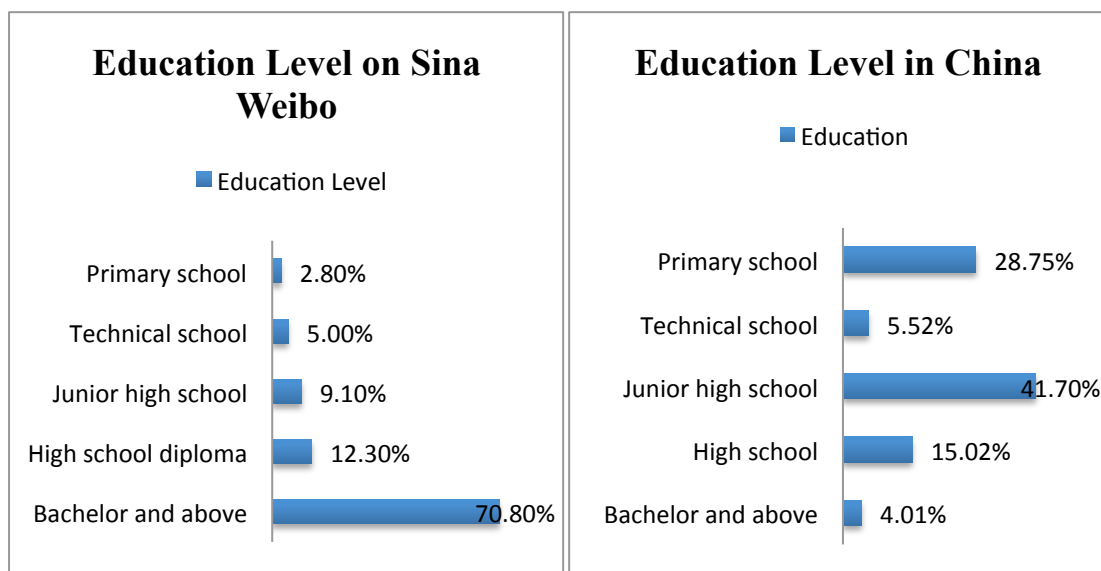


Figure 6. Education level on Sina Weibo & China

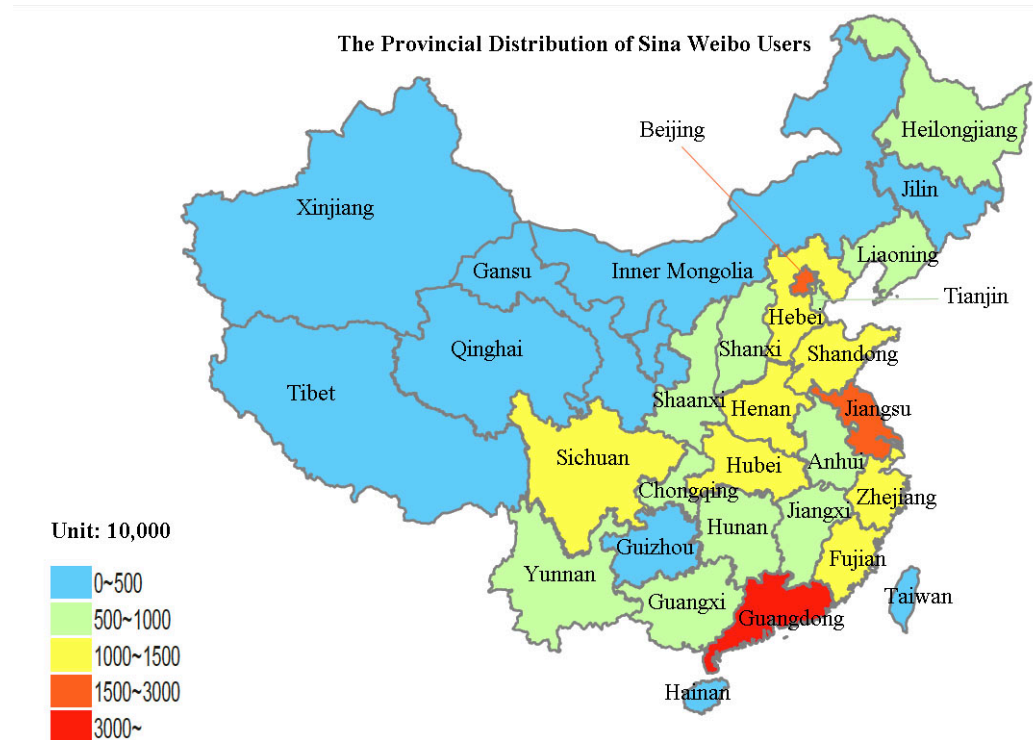


Figure 7. The distribution of Sina Weibo users in China. Adapted from “The Official Reptot of Sina Weibo Users in 2012,” by the Sina Inc., 2012.

Table 2

The Comparison of Sina Weibo Accounts on Home Page

	Zhong Rujiu (victim in Yihuang event)		Deng Fei (journalist)		Chen Kun (actor)	
Number	Re-tweet	Comment	Re-tweet	Comment	Re-tweet	Comment
1	4	1	16	8	1,025	381
2	7	1	10	5	1,825	2,094
3	113	2	61	12	1,459	1,140
4	5	1	93	22	1,166	630
5	3	2	58	26	458	261

6	5	2	33	27	10,511	3,537
7	8	2	100	18	7,017	2,563
8	8	0	47	20	3,719	4,011
9	13	1	43	14	1,250	1,311
10	9	3	867	62	22,003	5,060
11	11	4	782	83	30,595	1,921
12	17	2	338	69	4,387	3,195
13	17	0	450	67	7,784	2,815
14	73	1	643	115	612	336
15	10	4	444	85	3,096	858
16	5	2	123	46	485	429
17	5	1	531	124	1,913	593
18	5	0	373	67	6,372	3,610
19	2	1	135	9	1,260	1,990
20	20	3	5	6	26,968	11,856
21	45	2	203	31	2,639	1,931
22	3	0	737	36	1,398	1,677
23	3	1	34	21	633	699
24	6	2	17	6	483	365
25	7	2	12	4	841	726

26	11	2	25	9	5,289	894
27	8	1	62	25	543	522
28	141	2	20	7	15,408	3,704
29	14	3	17	15	2,748	5,134
30	0	0	24	9	837	385
31	8	3	8	10	1,053	461
32	2	0	44	37	450	332
33	4	3	15	8	2,123	562
34	16	8	35	14	328	336
35	2	0	1149	219	1,906	1,132
36	1	1	362	76	628	1,157
37	17	2	165	168	5,825	1,079
38	10	3	363	120	3,028	1,034
39	67	5	236	96	986	751
40	2	1	1035	299	5,464	1,703
41	10	3	13	5	10,264	1,414
42	8	2	101	22	4,177	988
43	19	0	287	85	2,134	632
44	3	2	89	17	768	424
45	3	1	92	25	2,883	1,847

Average	16.7	1.8	228.8	50.0	4594.2	1744
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The Political Role of Sina Weibo

Political Content

In 2013, only three topics in all the twenty trending topics were political topics, and Sina Weibo was dominated by entertainment (Table 4). Also, as shows in Table 3, only one political actor was in the top 50 ranking ordered by follower number. Celebrities from dominated attentions on Sina Weibo, and politics is less important in contrast to entertainment, not to mention the regular people.

Table 3

The most popular accounts on Sina Weibo

Rank, Followers, and Type (E=entertainment, C=culture, B=business, SW=Sina Weibo Official Accounts, P=politics, M=media, N=news, S=sports, F=funny)									
1. (72,018,670), E	2. (63,898,961), E	3. (61,709,540), C	4. (58,147,134), E	5. (55,650,371), E	6. (55,535,327), E	7. (51,396,340), B	8. (50,025,632), E	9. (49,205,581), SW	10. (48,988,170), SW
11. (45,963,099), E	12. (45,273,264), E	13. (44,139,848), E	14. (44,038,059), SW	15. (42,581,195), E	16. (41,889,447), E	17. (41,674,512), P	18. (41,356,543), SW	19. (40,889,315), E	20. (40,198,479), E
21. (39,864,291), E/B	22. (39,397,177), E	23. (37,047,459), E	24. (36,752,302), E	25. (35,496,485), E	26. (35,289,883), E	27. (35,255,603), E	28. (34,714,127), M/B	29. (34,535,745), E	30. (34,217,985), E
31. (34,020,446),	32. (33,840,046),	33. (33,678,514),	34. (33,641,230),	35. (32,583,343),	36. (31,712,504),	37. (31,361,544),	38. (31,005,801),	39. (30,936,361),	40. (30,888,247),

C	M/E	E	E	E	E	SW/M /N	C/E/M	M	E
41. (30,74 6,449), E	42. (30,38 1,138), F	43. (29,74 1,128), E	44. (29,49 4,146), E	45. (29,10 7,237), E	46. (28,82 6,645), E	47. (28,43 4,706), E	48. (28,10 4,210), E	49. (27,35 0,674), S	50. (26,91 4,448), E

Data Source: <http://data.weibo.com/top/hot/all>

Table 4

Top trend on Sina Weibo in 2013 (C=crisis, E=entertainment, EV=event, NB=network

buzzwords (usually satire), P=politics)

Rank	Topic	Brief Introduction	Type	The number of mention	The number of searching
1	We want to make friends with Tuhao	“Tuhao” was used to be a negative word to describe landowner	NB	134,770,812	86,845
2	11/11 on Tianmao	A shopping festival	EV	127,721,535	79,358
3	Yaan earthquake		C	97,696,760	327,227
4	Diaosi	A self-deprecating word means young poor guy	NB	93,823,603	64,995
5	The voice of China	A reality talent show	E	60,546,809	2,226,647
6	Spring gala	The traditional Chinese spring festival TV	EV	41,668,208	407,031

		program			
7	Tiny Times	A movie	E	40,457,979	1,704,253
8	Xue Manzi was arrested for whoring behavior	Xue Manzi is an opinion leader on Weibo	P	29,975,104	1,165,179
9	So Young	A movie	E	29,951,153	842,551
10	Super Boy	A singing contest	E	18,310,889	1,166,116
11	Dad, Where Are We Going	A reality show	E	197,729,982	3,299,340
12	Haze Over China	A environmental disaster	C	16,271,903	69,312
13	The Defeat of the Chinese Soccer Team		EV	15,088,298	269,886
14	I Am a Singer	A singing competition program	E	14,662,598	2,133,097
15	Avian Flu H7N9		C	14,184,368	264,436
16	Two Sessions	National People's Congress and Chinese People's Political Consultative Conferences	P & EV	9,480,529	128,675
17	Chinese Idol	Similar to American Idol	E	7,919,904	721,884
18	The Big Yellow Duck	A giant modern sculpture	NB	7,730,290	228,763

19	Li XX was alleged to be a suspect in a rape case	Li XX (Tianyi) is a Chinese general's son	P	7,371,065	1,581,080
20	Shenzhou 10	A space mission	EV	6,055,569	31,448

Data Source: Sina Weibo Data Center

Political Discussion

For analyzing the quality of political discussion on Sina Weibo, I selected Yihuang event as the topic and examined the posts of Zhong Rujiu and Deng fei on the same incident. Table 5 shows that the followers of Deng fei (opinion leader) tended to forward the message, whereas the followers of Zhong Rujiu (the victim in Yihuang event) tended to comment. This implies that the opinion leaders on Sina Weibo work like media to spread information, while the original regular posters attract more users to engage in discussion. Hence, the discussion from Zhong's account was chose to conduct content analysis. Based on this analysis 54.6 percent of all comments are typical political comments, and in all the political comments 55 percent people held negative views on the Chinese government in this event. No user held a positive view on the government. In this case, at least a group opinion was formed on Sina Weibo if it could not be defined as public opinion. In order to study whether Sina Weibo influenced Yihuang event, an extensively research on this case was conducted.

Table 5

Discussion of Yihuang event on Sina Weibo

Topic	Account	Time period	Number of re-tweets	Number of comments	Two-way communication in comments

The Zhong family was harassed by the Yihuang officials during the night on Sep 16, 2010	Deng Fei	09/17/2010, 09:34 – 09/23/2010, 15:51	352	189	4
	Zhong Rujiu	09/17/2014, 11:48 – 10/02/2010, 14:11	292	313	18

The Role of Sina Weibo in Yihuang Event

To understand Yihuang event better, it is helpful to know some background of the urbanization and the economic development in China. In recent years, China has developed fast. However, this economic growth is mainly based on real estate development and export. These activities, especially the real estate development, contribute to the conflicts between the Chinese government and the Chinese citizens. This is because the Chinese government needs to recover the lands where the residents live, and then sell it to developers or build public facilities. Further, the government and the residents might never reach agreements on the relocation compensation since each party wants to maximize its own interest. Therefore, the Chinese government and the Chinese citizens separate: the Chinese government represents the so-called “collective interest” or the party elite interest; the Chinese citizens defend the individual interest or the grass-roots interest. The conflicts between the two parties usually happened in county-level in China.

Table 6

Administrative divisions of China

Level	Name	Types							
1	Provincial level 省级	Municipality 直辖市 (4)	Province 省 (23)	Autonomous region 自治区 (5)	Special administrative region 特别行政区 (2)				
2	Prefectural level (excluding Taiwan) 地级	Prefectural-level city 地级市 (283)	Prefecture 地区 (17)	Autonomous prefecture 自治州 (30)	Leagues 盟 (3)				
3	County level (excluding Taiwan) 县级	District 市辖区 (853)	County-level city 县级市 (370)	County 县 (1461)	Autonomous county 自治县 (117)	Banner 旗 (49)	Autonomous banner 自治旗 (3)	Special district 特区 (2)	Forestry district 林区 (1)
4	Below the county level (excluding Taiwan) 县以下	Town 镇 (19410)	Township 乡 (14571)	Sub-district office 街道办事处 (6923)			Agency 区公所 (2)		

As table 1 shows, counties belong to the third level of administrative divisions in China, and geographically they are at the border areas between urban and rural. Economically, the main source of county revenue is agriculture. Most county residents are agricultural Hukou (a resident registration system in China. Chinese citizens are categorized into those hold non-agricultural Hukou and those hold agricultural Hukou). Also, county governments are particularly important in China since counties are the lowest layer at which the Chinese central government really function. Hence, counties have always been at the forefront of urbanization in China, and county governments need to promote the process. Then, county residents and county governments might conflict. The Yihuang event happened in this context.

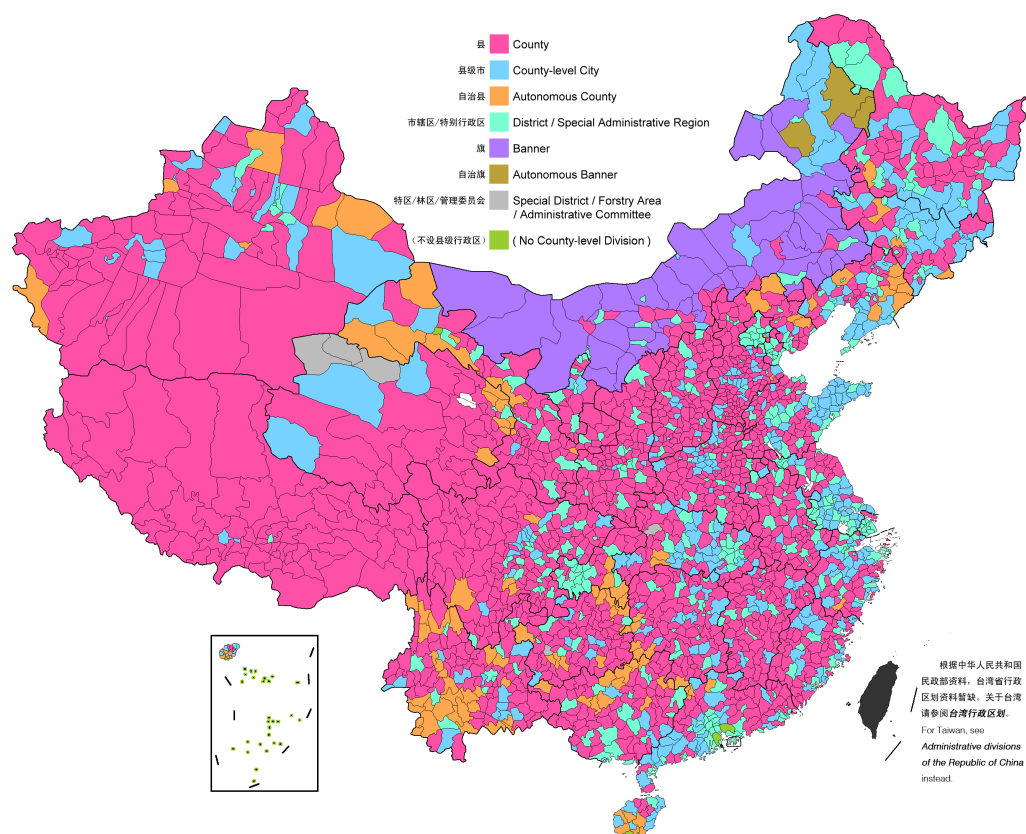


Figure 8. Map of divisions in China. From

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:China_County-level.png

Yihuang is a small county that belongs to Fuzhou city (prefectural-level city) in Jiangxi province that is in the southeast of China. Before 2000 this county didn't have transit road, state road, highway, railway, water transport, and air transport, so it was very impoverished. In this context, economic development is the most important priority to the Yihuang government. In 2007, they decided to build a new bus terminal in the east where the Zhong family's house located. However, the Zhong family and the Yihuang government could not reach an agreement about the relocation compensation. Hence, the Zhong family refused to move out, and this was the fuse of the next tragedies.

On September ten 2010, the Yihuang county head led more than one hundred officers to the Zhong family and tried to demolish their house. During this process, the officers quarreled with the Zhong family, and they caught several Zhong family members. Fearing to lose their house, Zhong Ruqin, Luo Zhifeng, and Ye Zhongcheng used gasoline to commit self-immolation to fight against the Yihuang officers. This emergency stopped the planned forced demolition.

Two days later, the Yihuang government released an official interpretation that explained this event as an accidental injury. Also, the officers claimed that the Zhong family played the old trick of spilling gasoline to intimidate the officers but inadvertently burned themselves. The Zhong family denied this explanation, and they insisted that the three Zhong members ignited themselves to protest against the forced demolition. To reflect the truth to the central government and protect their rights and interests, Zhong Rujiu and Zhong Rucui, daughters of the Zhong family, decided to fly to Beijing to on September 16 to petition. This day was considered to be the watershed of the Yihuang Event. On that day the Zhong sisters

went to the Nanchang airport and planned to take the airplane at 8:15 AM to Beijing to reflect the situation and accept the interview of Hong Kong Phoenix Television. However, when they were exchanging boarding tickets, forty-four Yihuang government officials blocked them and caught Zhong Rujiu. At this moment, Zhong Rucui asked help from the airport staff. One staff took them to the passenger seating area and notified the airport police. Several minutes later, the Yihuang leaders and the airport police came, and they took the Zhong sisters to the airport public security bureau office where the Zhong sisters called Liu Chang who is a journalist of New Century Weekly and told him this circumstance. Liu Chang tried to call the airport public police but no one replied. Without other ways to seek assistances, he posted the first microblog about this airport event on Sina Weibo and asked help from the Internet users at 7:39 AM since the Chinese people usually check messages on their mobile phones. At first, only a few microbloggers re-posted it. However, twenty minutes later the situation changed because the Sina Weibo opinion leader Murong Xuechun forwarded it. Within one hour, this post had been re-posted nearly one thousand times, and in that morning it had been forwarded more than two thousand times and received more than one thousand comments. At 7:50 AM, half an hour before their plane was to take off, Zhong Rucui asked the airport police to help them board, but they were refused and were told that the higher authorities forbade them to do so.

The airport police then suggested the Zhong sisters to leave the airport and talk with the Yihuang officers in another place. The sisters obeyed and the Yihuang officers followed them as they left the bureau office. The Zhong sisters went to the ladies room, they rushing in and locking themselves in the corner compartment. It was their last refuge. Terribly, every

several minutes, a Yihuang female officer knocked at their door and requested them to come out to talk. In this corner, they called a staff of the Phoenix Television Liu Chang and described the situation to Liu. Liu typed it into computer and sent it to Deng Fei, a journalist of the Phoenix Television via QQ (an instant message service). At 8:57 AM Deng posted the first microblog on Sina Weibo to report that the Zhong sisters were blocked by the Yihuang officers. At 9:04 AM he sent the second post to report the ladies room event. In the next three hours, Deng posted more than twenty microblogs and nine were reported live under the name: “The Battle of the Ladies Room” (女厕攻防战). These posts attracted many microbloggers and journalists. Hearing this event, Zhang Guodong, a journalist from Southern Metropolis Daily, rushed to the airport. At the same time, the Kuliu Website, a famous Chinese video site similar to YouTube, contacted the Zhong sisters and interviewed them through mobile phone in the ladies room. Two hours later, this record was uploaded onto the Internet. Because of these reports and the instant messages on Sina Weibo, tens of thousands of netizens became concerned about this event and re-posted these texts everywhere. In addition, the Tencent website put the ladies room battle at the front-page of their Weibo. At 10:00 AM, Zhang Guodong arrived at the airport and helped the Zhong sisters out of the ladies room that the two Yihuang female officers were still guarding. The Yihuang county mayor took the Zhong sisters to a teahouse to talk. Finally, they reached an agreement: the next morning, in the presence of the media, the Zhong sisters would talk with a higher officer of Fuzhou city (the higher officer can directly deal with what happened in lower level divisions according to the Chinese law).

At noon of the same day, Deng received a phone call from a Sina staff notifying him

that due to too much pressure they planned to delete all his posts about the battle of the ladies room. However, they did not clearly explain the source of this pressure, but it was assumed to be the government. Although it was disappointing, all his messages were forwarded to other famous websites such as Tianya and Mop, so netizens still could obtain this information. Also, this event had already attracted tens of thousands of Internet users and many journalists. Thus, at this moment, the Zhong sisters would be safe. That same night the Chengdu TV station from Sichuan province and Hong Kong Phoenix Television broadcasted the programs about this airport event. Because of microblogging, the Yihuang local event became a breaking news. However, no local newspapers or TV stations in Jiangxi province and Yihuang county reported this event. In China this phenomenon is normal that the local media either not report the scandals or report it in a positive way due to pressure from the government.

In the morning of September 17, experiencing the huge power of microblogging, Zhong Rujiu opened her Sina and Tencent Weibo accounts. Her accounts immediately attracted more than ten thousands of microbloggers. The same night, the Fuzhou municipal party committee, the superiors of the Yihuang officers, released a statement saying they had decided to “deal with” eight high level Yihuang officials that were responsible for the self-immolation and the battle of the ladies room events without clarifying the charges. The Yihuang county party secretary Qiu Jianguo and the Yihuang county mayor Su Jianguo would be investigated. However, the next day Zhong Rujiu reported on Sina Weibo and Tencent Weibo that her uncle Ye Zhongcheng, the victim in the self-immolation event, was dead. Even worse, the Yihuang county party secretary Qiu Jianguo led more than one hundred people grabbed the corpse to stop the hospital to issue death certificate without

which the Zhong family could not prove that Ye was dead. She also stated on her Weibo that her brothers, sisters and she were under house arrest by the Yihuang officers. At the same night, the turning point occurred; the Fuzhou city mayor came to the hotel where the Zhong family was house arrested and promised that they would be free and that the government would send the best doctors to cure the remaining two victims of the self-immolation event. From this moment, the situation began moving in the right direction.

In the following days, Zhong Rujiu continued to send messages and photos of these events on Weibo, refuted the Yihuang official explanation, and revealed the true process of the whole event. She also received help from other microbloggers to assist her to arrange the best surgeons to treat her family members. The online support further transformed into offline actions.

Finally, on October 10 the Jiangxi provincial party committee decided to remove Qiu Jianguo from the position of Yihuang county party secretary and dismiss Su Jianguo from the position of Yihuang county mayor. Although they did not provide official interpretation or mention the Yihuang event, this is the first event among the nine similar forced demolition cases in recent years in which the officers in command were punished. In “The Tragedy of Self-immolation on Weibo Live,” Law and life, the influential central-level legal news publication, commented that the Yihuang event reflected the power of microblogging to protect the citizens’ rights and interests. Without microblogging, the journalists could not have reported these events immediately, no one would have known the tragedy of the Zhong family, the Zhong sisters would have been caught and brought back to Yihuang, and the ending would have been lamentable such as what happened before microblogging. In the

previous nine events the texts of these cases were deleted, no new posts of such issues were allowed, and no one knew what happened to the victims. Weibo provides a place for the grass roots to report news and express their opinions, while avoiding the information censorship and control in China. With Weibo, every citizen can be a journalist and provide information to the public. This has been changing the way people get information and the communication between the government, media, and individuals. Figure 9 reveals the influence of microblogging: every Internet user can report news to the public and interact with mass media and the Chinese government; this communication might affect the opinion of mass media and the decision-making of the governments (Liu).

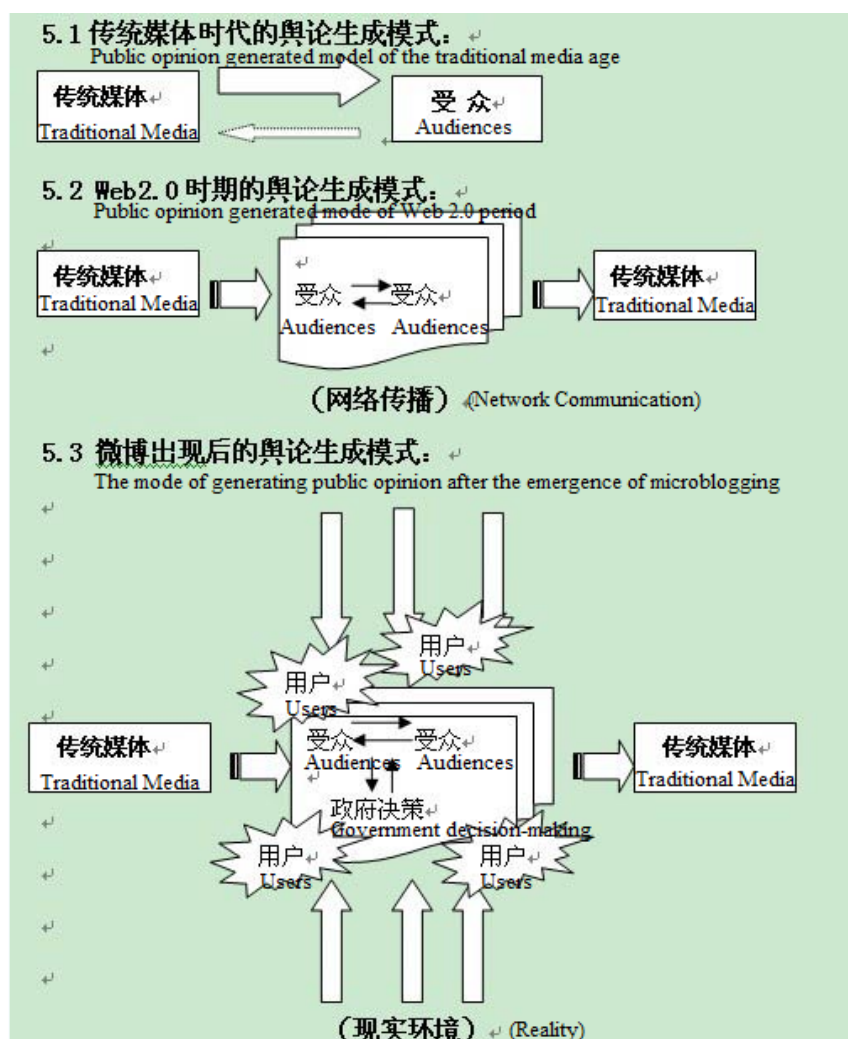


Figure 9. The changes of microblogging brought to the public opinion generated mode. Adapted from “The Impact of Microblogging to the Public Opinion Generated Mode,” people.com.

As figure 9 illustrates, in the Yihuan event microblogging reflected its power to the government and mass media. Before the self-report of Zhong Rujiu and other texts on Sina Weibo, the Yihuang government reported the self-immolation event as an accident. In the report, the Yihuang government did not take any responsibility to this tragedy and shifted the blame to the victims. On the official perspective, the Zhong family obstructed the economic development and the collective interest of Yihuang. However, several days later this text was cancelled since the Yihuang official explanation obviously contradicted to the information on Weibo. Similar to the government’s behavior, the state-run news media People’s Daily also changed their attitudes after the Yihuang event was exposed on Weibo. On September 14, People’s Daily stated that claiming rights should not always rely on self-injury and asks citizens to find other ways such as independent third-party arbitration institutions to protect their interests (Zhang). In this article, the author does not mention the reasons, the process, and even the government action in the Yihuang event. Also, the writer displays no sympathy to the victims and defines this event as self-injury. It is clear that the state-run media represents the interests of the Chinese government and the party elite. The individual interest of the Chinese citizens may be not the issue they want to discuss. However, just a few days after the battle of the ladies room microblogging live, People’s Daily changed their position. On September 20, they released another report about the Yihuang event. They claimed that the Chinese central government had forbidden the local government to execute demolition

directly a few months ago. Also, they emphasized that the local governments should consider the individual interests during the economic development and should not regard ordinary citizens as opponents (Fan). Within the short span of six days, the People's daily dramatically transformed from the watchdog of the party elite to the defender of the grass roots. Except the direction from the highest authorities, it is highly possible that the information on Sina Weibo forced the government and the official media to change.

Technically, if someone is not satisfied with the compensatory decisions of demolition, she or he could seek for legal activities to protect their rights. The solutions are: applying for administrative reconsideration, filing an administrative lawsuit, and petitioning. In this case, the Zhong sisters tried to fly to Beijing to petition. Petitioning is known as complaint letters and visits (信访) in China, and the meaning in China is not identical with the English interpretation. According to Regulation on Complaint Letters and Visits (信访条例), the term complaint letters and visits means "the activities that a citizen, legal person or any other organizations who, by way of letter, e-mail, telephone or visit, etc., reports facts, submits proposals or opinions, or files a complaint to the people's governments at various levels or working departments of the people's governments at or above the county level, which shall be dealt with by the relevant administrative organs according to law". The Zhong sisters' behavior belongs to the category of visit. However, they failed, and the Yihuang officials brought them back. Usually, if the complaint makers failed to petition, the local governments might punish them (Fang, 2013), although such punishments are prohibited by law. For instance, a report issued by Human Rights Watch (2005) says Ms. Kang, a rural woman went to Beijing to petition for her injured husband, but the retrievers (截访人员)

seized her and brought her back to Jilin:

[In Jilin], I spent sixteen days in the detention house. They shackled me to a chair by my hands and feet. I couldn't move at all. Everything was swollen, my hands, my feet. Everything became numb. They beat me and I couldn't take it. It was so hard. After sixteen days, I was sentenced to reeducation through labor for one year. It was the first month of the lunar new year [roughly, February 2002]...

I was beaten in there four times because I wouldn't eat. I'm a vegetarian so I don't eat meat... (p. 52)

Similar cases are not uncommon in China. Hence, without Sina Weibo it is highly possible that the Yihuang government would have demolished their house and sent them to prison with no charges. Sina Weibo did help them prevent the potential tragedies and protect their rights and interests. In addition, the re-tweet by opinion leaders helped the information to spread.

How about if the Zhong sisters successfully go to Beijing? Technically, the Zhong sisters should make the complaint to Yihuang county government or the next higher-level government – Fuzhou city government based on the Regulation on Complaint Letters and Visits. Even they went to the Chinese central government to petition, the central government would order the local government to resolve it. Usually, not only the local official do not handle the case justly, but also punish or torture the petitioners. Mr. Ming, a former school teacher in Shanxi, came to Beijing to make a complaint in 2004. The reason is that his family members were beaten by a group of thugs and one was died, but after he called the police they didn't take it seriously. Even worse, he tried all possible means for two years, the city

police, the city government, the county police, yet no one cared. Although he received letters from national authorities and instruct the local government to deal it, no local officials took it seriously. They even said, “We’ll drag it out till you’re dead [wo men tuo si ni]. Once you die, the problem is solved” (Human Rights Watch, 2005, p. 84). Thus, even the Zhong sisters went to Beijing successfully and got reply from the central government, the Yihuang government might not resolve the problem.

In short, the ordinary Chinese people hardly seek justice via the petitioning system. No matter where they go, their attempts are useless. How about administrative reconsideration and lawsuit? In a country one party controls, and the leaders in governments or administrative departments have absolute power. The leaders such as county mayors can easily influence the decisions made by judicial court or people’s congress, and judicial independence cannot exist. Hence, without Sina Weibo and forwarding by the opinion leaders the Zhong family members are dead.

The function of Sina Weibo in the Yihuang event

In the Yihuang event, Weibo helped the users to report real-time news, seek help, express opinions, supervise governments, and even influence government decisions.

First, Weibo helped the grass roots publish breaking news and broadcast the truth to the public that was impossible before. On September 18 2010, more than thirteen thousand microbloggers re-posted and commented Zhong Rujiu’s messages, photos, and videos about the Yihuang event on Tencent Weibo (all the information about this event on Sina Weibo was deleted completely). Not only the Internet users forwarded these messages on Weibo, but also they re-posted it on famous websites and forums such as Tianya and Mop. Moreover, when

they forwarded these texts, they asked others to re-post and help the Zhong family. For instance, one microblogger says: “re-posting, make more people know it.” Also, another re-poster states: “forwarding is help, crowd is power.” These actions attracted more Chinese to concern this event and made the government know that the ordinary citizens had already known the truth, so they could not hide the reality anymore. Before the emergence of microblogging, the victims of the events in which the government violated the citizens’ rights and interests had no way to tell the truth to the public. Even if some media tried to report the events, these newspapers or magazines would be forbidden to publish by the government. The information online would have been deleted entirely before lots of people could know it. However, with the help of Weibo and its combination with mobile phones, the victims can send messages on Weibo and broadcast them to one billion cell phone users in China. Even some people do not have Weibo accounts, they can get this information through other ways by mobile phones such as surfing the websites or receiving SMS from their friends. Hence, once a piece of news is broadcasting on Weibo, no way can stop the spread completely unless the government shuts down the whole Internet service and the telecommunication service, which is nearly impossible. In the Yihuang event, Weibo helped the Zhong family to update their situation and ask for help from other microbloggers. Especially in the battle of the ladies room event, microblogging and the mobile phone are the only ways to communicate and report the scene, and they finally helped the Zhong sisters avoid constraining by the Yihuang government. Therefore, the convenience of posting texts and sharing them with the enormous mobile phone users equips the grass roots the ability to send sensitive information and be individual journalist to tell the truth.

Further, the real-time of microblogging makes it possible for the victims to get help immediately from other microbloggers. Since nearly everyone in China owns a mobile phone, the eyewitness can instantly send the photos and reports on Weibo. In the battle of the ladies room event, the journalists promptly reported it to the microbloggers and attracted lots of attentions. Without it, people might still know the event, but they could not help the Zhong sisters because the sisters would have been brought back to Yihuang and persecuted by the government before others knew it. Also, the Zhong sister asked other microbloggers to find excellent surgeons to cure the victims in the self-immolation tragedy, and several users from different cities assisted her to arrange the best burn therapist from the Chinese PLA General Hospital in Beijing to fly to Nanchang to treat the patients when the Nanchang hospital had no way to cure them. In such disasters, microblogging can broadcast it instantly, seek help even faster than the government and institutions, and avoid the situation becoming worse which is impossible before the emergence of Weibo. Hence, microblogging helps the victims get assistance promptly and prevent the government from further hurting the vulnerable individuals.

Also, the anonymity of Weibo makes the grass roots can express their opinions freely, e.g. send messages against the government, and this makes the government in high tension. For example, on September 18 2010, one microblogger commented on Zhong Rujia's Tencent Weibo message and said: "history has proved that who abandon people will finally be discarded by people." Another user even stated: "please forwarding: if the government compels its citizens too much, people will overthrow it." Many similar posts were updated and these texts were forwarded widely. This clearly displayed that the grass roots were not

satisfied with the Chinese government, and they even wanted to revolt. These political sensitive texts on Weibo might attract the attention of the central government because maintaining the social stability is the most important policies to them, and they fear rebellions happen in China. Thus, it is possible that the central government would force the local government to compromise to the victims to avoid such anti-government sentiment further developing. In the Yihuang event, the higher authorities probably had applied this strategy to put pressure on the Fuzhou and Yihuang government, and forced them to stop the forced demolition and treat the Zhong victims.

On Weibo not only some microbloggers addresses these anti-government ideas, but also they construct a new identity of Chinese netizens that distinguishes from what identity the Communist Party of China and the Chinese government try to establish for the Chinese citizens. On September 18 2010 a microblogger claimed: “the government and the citizens are always opponents.” Another poster stated: “China is not belong to ‘them,’ China is ours.” A netizen even queried: “which interest does the government represent?” Also, a microblogger argued: “what the Zhong family could rely on is only the netizens.” These posts reveals that many Internet users consider that the party and the grass roots are separating and they believe the idea of netizen is a new identity of the grass roots. Microblogging would help them to protect their rights and interests from being violated by the government. In addition, many microbloggers applied the idea of netizen to call other users to take action to help the Zhong family and be united. These behaviors attracted lots of Internet users to behave as a netizen and react to the Yihuang event. The unity of the Chinese netizens might further stir the Chinese society to change.

While in the Yihuang event the Zhong family protected their rights and interests, this was not a complete victory of applying microblogging to fight against the government, and the power of Sina Weibo did not change the opinion of the government essentially. For instance, at September 17 night, the Fuzhou municipal party committee decided to deal with the Yihuang officers. However, on September 20, the Fuzhou government sent a report to Xinhua news agency that is one of the most influential state-run news media that represents the government's views. In this report they insisted that the forced demolition was legal and no illegal activities happened in the whole process. In addition, they accused the Zhong family of requiring excessive relocation compensation. This was in stark contrast to the former official decision. If the forced demolition action was justifiable, the Yihuang officers should not have been investigated. From the contradiction between these two official actions, while it is highly possible that microblogging had pushed the government to react to the Yihuang event and cure the Zhong victims, it did not change their opinions fundamentally.

In addition, On Weibo the Zhong family asked the higher authorities to help them and this was supported by many microbloggers. Also, during the decision-making process of punishing the Yihuang higher-level officers no judiciary participated and all results were release by the government without clarifying the charges. This is similar to what happened before the advent of microblogging: when their interests were violated by the local governments, the grass-roots always went to Beijing to petition for a fair judge from the central government. In the Yihuang event at first the Zhong sisters did want to do the same thing, but finally asked help on Sina Weibo because they were obstructed by the Yihuang government. They wanted the microbloggers to help but also appealed to the assistance from

the higher authorities. While microblogging provides another way for the grass-roots to seek assistances and express ideas, the victims still need the attention of the government though they could receive help from other netizens to some extent. Therefore, the revolution with the help of online social media (the “digital democracy”) to overthrow the government such as the Arab Spring might not happen in China since the Chinese government maintains the authoritarian style of rule and many Chinese citizens still believe the central government and expect them to protect the individual rights and interests. Thus, the central government’s reaction to online social media is fundamental to the future development of new media in China.

What is the current central Chinese government’s attitude towards Weibo? The absence of the central government’s Weibo accounts reveals that they are reluctant to adapt to the social media and use it to actively communicate with the ordinary people. Two reasons might explain the government’s tardiness: the central Chinese leadership does not want to participate (e.g., they do not really care the potential of Weibo); they do not know how to apply the online social media and are studying it now. If the former is true, then the Chinese citizens might need to keep pushing the government to talk with them. However, if the latter is true, what is going to happen? Will the Chinese government communicate with the netizens online and try to resolve problems? Will the digital democracy come to China? The situation in Israel might help to answer.

During the 2008-2009 Gaza War, the Israeli government limited reporters to approaching the war zone, yet they recruited many volunteers to open a PR campaign to gain international support via using online social media. Besides, the Israeli Defense Forces

launched a YouTube Channel and uploaded several videos with English subtitles to justify their attack. Although some viewers question IDF's justification, the clips became very popular (Kuntsman & Stein, 2010). Not only the IDF proactively applied online social media, but also they restricted their soldiers to carry cell phones and interfered with electronic signal in the Strip. As a result, the Palestinian fighters' communication was interrupted and ordinary Gazans' reporting was neither blocked. Although hard to measure, it is possible that these state-sponsored operations positively influenced some people's perception of Israel. However, in late May 2010 in the reporting of the Gaza flotilla raid in cyberspace, the Israeli state's efforts seemed not as effective as in the Gaza War. Both the flotilla and the Israeli state used social media to update news and post visual materials, yet the reliability and credibility of the documents were questioned and the same visual information generated divergent readings on the Internet. Also, many people off the battlefield had participated in supporting or opposing the Israeli occupation in social media. Such phenomenon on the one hand demonstrated the political potential of online social media to let everyone's voice be heard, on the other hand showed the paradox of new media: reveal and conceal the truth at the same time.

If the Chinese government begins to engage in online social media, will it operate as the Israeli government? In these events, the Israeli state tried to control the information flow and manipulate people's conception of the government. However, many viewers and activists posted different photos and texts to oppose the government's documents, and eventually the truth was not covered from the public. Will the power of new media take effect in China if the Chinese government tries to apply online social media as the Israeli government?

Unfortunately, it is possible that the Chinese leadership could control online information

more “effectively” than the Israeli government. The reason is that the channels they use are fundamentally different: the Israeli state has been applying the “Western” social media such as YouTube, while the Chinese government would use the domestic social media such as Weibo. In China, nearly all the Western social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube) is blocked, and the Chinese residents only could use domestic social media (e.g., Weibo or Renren). Hence, the Chinese government could control the information more easily than the Israeli government. For example, they could require the Sina company to cancel all sensitive messages on Weibo, and this kind of actions have been taken several times by the Chinese government. In contrast, the Israeli government could not control the information on the Western social media, and netizens could oppose the Israeli government through posting their own photos and messages. Therefore, the capability of controlling information flow of the Chinese central government is far beyond the Israeli government, and the power of the online social media to expose the truth would be limited in China.

Moreover, most information on Chinese social media is written in the Chinese language, while many messages about Israel in online social media is posted in the English language. The use of different languages could make huge different reactions among online users. The Chinese language is nearly impossible to be understood by westerners, while the English language could be understood by netizens from many different countries. Hence, the Israeli government needs to be more cautious and sometimes even compromise to the pressure of public opinion. In contrast, the Chinese government would not be bothered by the Western viewers, so they could ignore the Chinese citizens’ opinions to some extent or even completely cancel the negative news about the government online.

Besides, the target audience of the Israeli government is the westerners, yet the Chinese government's audience should be the Chinese people if they choose to use online social media. In addition, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is an international issue and has drawn much attention from the Western countries, so the Israeli government is under enormous pressure. However, the issues on Sina Weibo usually are China's domestic events even though they are also related to human rights, and not as many Western people might be interested in these issues as in the Israel-related events. As a result, the Chinese government could treat the Chinese netizens and the domestic issues totally based on their interests.

In reality, the Chinese government already implemented censorship on Sina Weibo, but before an event happens they do not know what to cancel. Thus this is not as effective as they hope and the information spreading on Sina Weibo is out of technical control (Murong, 2013). Also, they began to arrest opinion leaders on Sina Weibo. For instance, Xue Manzi was arrested in Beijing for prostitution, and this was reported by Chinese Central Television. One might argue that Sina Weibo exposed these opinion leaders and helped the Chinese government to locate and monitor the Chinese netizens. However, before the emergence of microblogging, the Chinese government had already arrested many democrats with no charges, and we even do not know who they are. With Sina Weibo, if opinion leaders are arrested, the microblogger would know and the Chinese government needs to give explanations. Hence, Sina Weibo does more harm than good to the absolute power of the Chinese government.

Chapter 6: Conclusions and Recommendations

As examined in the Yihuang event, Sina Weibo helped the Zhong family fight against the Chinese government, and without it they could not protest their rights and interests. Sina Weibo has been making the Chinese society more transparency. Even the Chinese government is under its pressure to explain government actions that the Chinese citizens would not know before. From this perspective, mobile social media do empower the ordinary people though Sina Weibo does not constitute a public sphere in China. The difference between China and the countries with access to global social media is that usually in China the Chinese residents apply Sina Weibo to defense rights, not protest. Thus, the potential of digital democracy has not been tested in China.

After the arrestment of some opinion leaders, less people are talking about political issues on Sina Weibo, and this is similar to what happened on online forums before. However, the Chinese netizens can always find a new way to express their opinions. Recently, more and more people are shifting to WeChat (微信), a more private social media platform, to communicate with others. Although the censorship is implemented on this service, senders can easily bypass it via sending links to followers. As far as the people control the cutting edge technology, the social media will empower the Chinese citizens, and this is what is happening now. The only concern is that the judicial system is margined in the social media era just as what happened before the launch of Sina Weibo. Further study can be conducted to explore how mobile social media works with the Chinese law. Without respects to the judicial system, civil society is nothing but dream in China.

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Appendix

Coding manual

Type of comment

1. information
2. emoji
3. no information

Validity of comment

1 if yes (type 1)

0 if no (type 2 and 3)

Category of valid comment

1 if political

0 if apolitical

n/a if invalid

Attitude in political comment (towards the Chinese government and officials)

1 if positive

0 if neutral

-1 if negative

n/a if invalid or apolitical

Content of negative political comment

1. Criticism with no mobilization
 2. Mobilization
- n/a if invalid of apolitical

Coding schedule

Comment number	Type of comment	Validity of comment	Category of valid comment	Attitude in political comment	Content of negative political comment

Completed Coding Schedule

Comment number	Type of comment	Validity of comment	Category of valid comment	Attitude in political comment	Content of negative political comment
Z1	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z2	1	1	1	-1	1
Z3	1	1	1	-1	1
Z4	1	1	1	-1	2
Z5	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z6	1	1	1	-1	2
Z7	1	1	1	-1	1
Z8	1	1	1	-1	1
Z9	2	0	n/a	n/a	n/a
Z10	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z11	1	1	1	-1	1
Z12	1	1	1	0	n/a
Z13	1	1	1	-1	1
Z14	1	1	1	-1	1
Z15	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z16	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z17	1	1	1	-1	1
Z18	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z19	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z20	1	1	1	-1	1
Z21	1	1	1	0	n/a
Z22	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z23	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z24	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z25	1	1	1	0	n/a
Z26	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z27	1	1	1	-1	1
Z28	1	1	1	0	n/a
Z29	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z30	1	1	1	0	n/a

Z31	1	1	1	-1	1
Z32	1	1	1	-1	1
Z33	1	1	1	0	n/a
Z34	1	1	1	-1	1
Z35	1	1	1	-1	1
Z36	1	1	1	-1	1
Z37	1	1	1	-1	2
Z38	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z39	1	1	1	-1	1
Z40	1	1	1	-1	1
Z41	1	1	1	-1	1
Z42	3	0	n/a	n/a	n/a
Z43	1	1	1	0	n/a
Z44	1	1	1	-1	1
Z45	1	1	1	0	n/a
Z46	1	1	1	-1	1
Z47	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z48	1	1	1	-1	1
Z49	1	1	1	-1	1
Z50	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z51	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z52	1	1	1	-1	1
Z53	1	1	1	-1	1
Z54	3	0	n/a	n/a	n/a
Z55	1	1	1	0	n/a
Z56	1	1	1	-1	1
Z57	1	1	1	0	n/a
Z58	1	1	1	-1	1
Z59	1	1	1	-1	3
Z60	1	1	1	-1	3
Z61	1	1	1	0	n/a
Z62	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z63	1	1	1	0	n/a
Z64	1	1	1	0	n/a
Z65	1	1	1	-1	3
Z66	1	1	1	-1	3
Z67	1	1	1	0	n/a
Z68	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z69	1	1	1	0	n/a
Z70	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z71	1	1	1	-1	1
Z72	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z73	1	1	0	n/a	n/a

Z74	1	1	1	-1	2
Z75	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z76	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z77	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z78	1	1	1	0	n/a
Z79	1	1	1	-1	3
Z80	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z81	1	1	1	-1	1
Z82	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z83	1	1	1	0	n/a
Z84	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z85	1	1	1	-1	1
Z86	1	1	1	0	n/a
Z87	1	1	1	0	n/a
Z88	1	1	1	-1	1
Z89	1	1	1	-1	2
Z90	1	1	1	0	n/a
Z91	1	1	1	-1	3
Z92	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z93	1	1	1	0	n/a
Z94	1	1	1	n/a	n/a
Z95	3	0	n/a	n/a	n/a
Z96	1	1	1	0	n/a
Z97	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z98	1	1	1	-1	3
Z99	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z100	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z101	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z102	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z103	3	0	n/a	n/a	n/a
Z104	1	1	1	-1	3
Z105	1	1	n/a	n/a	n/a
Z106	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z107	1	1	1	-1	1
Z108	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z109	1	1	1	0	n/a
Z110	1	1	1	-1	1
Z111	1	1	1	-1	2
Z112	1	1	1	-1	3
Z113	2	0	n/a	n/a	n/a
Z114	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z115	3	0	n/a	n/a	n/a
Z116	1	1	1	n/a	n/a

Z117	2	0	n/a	n/a	n/a
Z118	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z119	1	1	1	-1	3
Z120	1	1	1	-1	1
Z121	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z122	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z123	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z124	1	1	1	-1	3
Z125	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z126	1	1	1	-1	3
Z127	1	1	1	-1	1
Z128	1	1	1	-1	1
Z129	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z130	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z131	1	1	1	n/a	n/a
Z132	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z133	1	1	1	n/a	n/a
Z134	1	1	1	-1	1
Z135	1	1	1	n/a	n/a
Z136	1	1	1	-1	1
Z137	1	1	1	n/a	n/a
Z138	1	1	1	-1	3
Z139	1	1	1	-1	1
Z140	1	1	1	-1	3
Z141	1	1	1	-1	3
Z142	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z143	1	1	1	-1	3
Z144	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z145	1	1	1	-1	1
Z146	1	1	1	-1	1
Z147	1	1	1	0	2
Z148	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z149	1	1	1	-1	1
Z150	1	1	n/a	n/a	n/a
Z151	1	1	1	n/a	n/a
Z152	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z153	1	1	1	-1	1
Z154	1	1	1	n/a	n/a
Z155	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z156	3	0	n/a	n/a	n/a
Z157	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z158	1	1	1	-1	3
Z159	1	1	1	n/a	n/a

Z160	1	1	1	n/a	n/a
Z161	1	1	1	-1	3
Z162	1	1	1	-1	3
Z163	1	1	1	n/a	n/a
Z164	1	1	1	n/a	n/a
Z165	1	1	1	-1	1
Z166	1	1	1	n/a	n/a
Z167	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z168	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z169	1	1	1	n/a	n/a
Z170	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z171	1	1	1	n/a	n/a
Z172	1	1	1	-1	1
Z173	1	1	1	-1	1
Z174	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z175	1	1	1	-1	1
Z176	1	1	1	n/a	n/a
Z177	1	1	1	-1	3
Z178	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z179	2	0	n/a	n/a	n/a
Z180	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z181	1	1	1	n/a	n/a
Z182	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z183	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z184	1	1	1	n/a	n/a
Z185	1	1	1	n/a	n/a
Z186	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z187	1	1	1	-1	3
Z188	1	1	1	-1	3
Z189	1	1	1	-1	3
Z190	2	0	n/a	n/a	n/a
Z191	1	1	1	-1	3
Z192	1	1	1	-1	1
Z193	1	1	1	-1	3
Z194	1	1	1	-1	3
Z195	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z196	1	1	1	-1	2
Z197	1	1	1	n/a	n/a
Z198	1	1	1	0	n/a
Z199	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z200	1	1	1	n/a	n/a
Z201	1	1	1	-1	2
Z202	1	1	0	n/a	n/a

Z203	1	1	1	n/a	n/a
Z204	1	1	1	-1	3
Z205	1	1	1	n/a	n/a
Z206	1	1	1	-1	3
Z207	1	1	1	n/a	n/a
Z208	1	1	1	-1	1
Z209	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z210	1	1	1	n/a	n/a
Z211	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z212	1	1	1	n/a	n/a
Z213	1	1	1	-1	3
Z214	1	1	1	n/a	n/a
Z215	1	1	1	n/a	n/a
Z216	1	1	1	n/a	n/a
Z217	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z218	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z219	1	1	1	-1	1
Z220	1	1	1	-1	1
Z221	1	1	1	n/a	n/a
Z222	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z223	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z224	1	1	1	n/a	n/a
Z225	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z226	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z227	1	1	1	n/a	n/a
Z228	1	1	1	-1	1
Z229	2	0	n/a	n/a	n/a
Z230	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z231	1	1	1	-1	1
Z232	1	1	1	n/a	n/a
Z233	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z234	1	1	1	n/a	n/a
Z235	1	1	1	-1	1
Z236	1	1	1	-1	1
Z237	1	1	1	n/a	n/a
Z238	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z239	1	1	1	-1	1
Z240	1	1	1	n/a	n/a
Z241	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z242	1	1	1	n/a	n/a
Z243	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z244	1	1	1	-1	1
Z245	1	1	1	n/a	n/a

Z246	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z247	1	1	1	n/a	n/a
Z248	1	1	1	-1	3
Z249	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z250	1	1	1	n/a	n/a
Z251	1	1	1	n/a	n/a
Z252	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z253	1	1	1	-1	1
Z254	1	1	1	-1	3
Z255	1	1	1	n/a	n/a
Z256	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z257	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z258	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z259	1	1	1	n/a	n/a
Z260	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z261	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z262	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z263	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z264	1	1	1	n/a	n/a
Z265	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z266	1	1	1	n/a	n/a
Z267	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z268	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z269	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z270	1	1	1	n/a	n/a
Z271	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z272	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z273	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z274	1	1	1	n/a	n/a
Z275	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z276	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z277	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z278	1	1	1	n/a	n/a
Z279	1	1	1	n/a	n/a
Z280	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z281	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z282	1	1	1	-1	3
Z283	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z284	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z285	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
Z286	1	1	0	n/a	n/a

Data Sources: <http://weibo.com/1819775930/wr0nRpDWJP?mod=weibotime>